

***Remarks By Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner  
NAIS Community Outreach Event  
Kansas City, Missouri  
October 31, 2006***

Thank you, John. My thanks to John Clifford for working tirelessly on the Animal ID issue. I also want to recognize Under Secretary Bruce Knight and all of the APHIS team for the planning and coordination that has gone into this workshop.

Secretary Johanns – who led the effort for animal identification as Governor of Nebraska -- has made it clear that N-A-I-S is and will remain one of his top priorities.

This is a complex process that starts at the grassroots, in the communities, with each and every one of you. The message that I bring here today – and I say this without hesitation – is that we need you in this effort.

Leadership among federal and state ID coordinators, and among producer groups, is essential.

No matter how hard the Secretary and I work, we'll never have the personal relationship with producers that you have in communities across the nation.

And let me say that we've been very impressed with the forward thinking and progressive attitude about N-A-I-S among several producer groups.

So I'm delighted that you're on board to help us press forward to achieve the goals that we have established.

I'm here to ask you to use this conference as a launching point to achieve the Secretary's goal of 25 percent of premises registered by the end of January 2007.

We're making great progress. Right now, out of about 1.4 million premises, we have about 325,000 signed up. We're getting close.

As we move forward, you'll find that "protection" is a key word. N-A-I-S is about protecting animal health, protecting access to markets and protecting neighbors who share the rural landscape.

And protection begins with the first step -- premises registration. To encourage farmers and ranchers to step up and register their premises, I have specific messages that I'll be asking you to deliver. But first I want to step back for a moment, look at the big picture and how much we have at stake.

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Animal agriculture is big business. Livestock and poultry contributed nearly \$127 billion to our national economy last year.

While our main focus in N-A-I-S is commercial agriculture, anyone involved with animals on a daily basis -- from managing herds to breeding thoroughbreds -- cares about the health of those animals and can benefit from participating in the system.

Those whose livelihoods depend on their animals have an even bigger stake.

I speak here from personal experience. I've been a cattleman myself. At one time, I owned a registered Angus herd.

So I understand the questions and concerns of farmers and ranchers about the system.

But I also recognize that the threat of a foreign animal disease outbreak in this country is real. Everyone can take appropriate steps to protect their animals, but some risk remains.

Mike Johanns and I pray that disease outbreak never arrives and we never have to put this system to full implementation. But if it does, on just one occasion, we will be glad that we fought this battle and did everything we could to put this system in place.

Everyone in this room understands the consequences of an outbreak: the loss of breeding stock, the labor time, the loss in trade, the economic loss that occurs to our farmers and ranchers. It can be staggering to producers, and it can be staggering to our rural communities.

You're here because you have the vision to recognize the value of a system that can conduct rapid traceouts and tracebacks when an outbreak occurs—ultimately within 48 hours.

And you're ready and willing to work with us on the critical first step -- encouraging producer participation.

Achieving our participation benchmarks means paying attention to the feedback we're receiving. It means educating and answering questions to address concerns and explain the benefits of the system.

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I ask you to keep stressing that this is a voluntary system. I believe that message strikes a chord with producers. It also helps deal with the myths, half-truths and misconceptions that have been circulating about N-A-I-S.

Some of you who have worked on the system for a long time feel that we can best achieve our objectives through a mandatory system.

But the best system, simply put, is one that will work.

That means a system farmers will participate in and support. And that's a voluntary system.

Since we've had some confusion on this, we need to be as clear as we can be. This is Voluntary with a capital V. Not a currently voluntary, then maybe a mandatory system. This is a permanently voluntary system at the federal level.

Of course, individual states may choose to require participation based on local needs. That's up to them.

But from a federal perspective, N-A-I-S is voluntary, designed with the express purpose of protecting animal health.

Participating is a business decision. It's the farmer's business, and the farmer's decision. We must make clear that farmers have a choice about the extent of their participation.

They can choose to simply register their premises and stop there. Registering premises today does not commit them to participating in the tagging or tracking phases of N-A-I-S down the road.

We must make the case that wise producers will want to make wise choices. Once premises are identified, we can provide producers the information they need in the event of a problem.

By registering their premises, they help to protect nearby farmers and ranchers. As our new brochures say, "Register to Protect: Your Animals. Your Livelihood. Your Future."

Wise producers will be looking to that future. They'll recognize that the day is soon coming when major food manufacturers, retailers and restaurants—as well as individual consumers—will insist on products from animals whose history can be traced.

Canada and Australia are already aggressively marketing their identification capabilities. Ultimately, the market will drive N-A-I-S. Our all-important job now is to build the system and promote participation until the market takes over.

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As you get out there with producers, you're going to get questions about confidentiality. This has been a real concern and the Secretary has addressed this issue head-on.

Farmers ask us: Are you going to track my animals on my farm?

Are you going to give out my private or confidential business information in response to Freedom of Information requests? Will other federal agencies have access to information about my operation?

As someone born and raised on a farm in Benton County, Indiana, and as your Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, I do not believe that we should be

in the business of possessing any more than the minimum information that we need to do our part in the system.

We've specifically built in safeguards to ensure that information is protected.

Most of the information that's part of the system will be kept in state and private databases, not with USDA.

It will only be accessed when there's a need to track animals in a disease outbreak situation.

Secretary Johanns has said repeatedly that USDA will protect farmers' private information. We are obligated to honor producers' privacy. And we take our responsibility for confidentiality seriously. We will not betray the trust that farmers and ranchers place in us.

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That trust goes to the core of the development of N-A-I-S as a true partnership.

Many of you have been with us all along the way and that's something we appreciate.

I know the folks in APHIS Public Affairs have worked hard, along with their contractors, to develop the new communications strategy. With the input of producers and partners, they've refined key messages to resonate with farmers and ranchers. I commend them for doing a great job in a short time.

This workshop is the culmination of their efforts. Now the ball will be in your court. You'll have the tools. You'll have the strategies. Remember – our first benchmark is 25 percent of premises registered by the end of January 2007.

The Secretary and I have great confidence in you. We respect and appreciate your commitment. We value your partnership with us and with the producers of our great nation.

With your leadership, we'll achieve our premises registrations goals and establish N-A-I-S as a true landmark for America's livestock industries. Thank you.